

National Research Center on Rural Education Support

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Issue Brief

Grow Your Own and Other Alternative Certification Programs in Rural School Districts

Kimberly Dadisman, Maggie Gravelle, Thomas Farmer, and Robert Petrin

Statement of the Issue

Rural low-wealth school districts often have difficulty finding and retaining highly qualified teachers. This is particularly true in the areas of special education, English language learner (ELL), and secondary math and science. There are a variety of factors that contribute to teacher shortages in these rural districts. Potential contributing factors include low salaries, geographic and social isolation, lower numbers of students attending college, requirements to teach multiple subjects and/or grades, and lack of professional development opportunities (Barley & Brigham, 2008; McCullough & Johnson, 2007; Monk, 2007; Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado, 2005). Most traditional teacher education programs are not preparing their students to teach in rural school districts (Barley & Brigham, 2008).

Growing Knowledge Base

Researchers and policymakers have frequently cited the need for specialized data for examining the challenges rural school districts face in recruiting and retaining educational professionals. The lack of such data is of specific concern to rural districts as they face challenges related to staffing. Therefore, in order to provide an up to date perspective on the problems associated with teacher recruitment in rural areas, and to expand the growing knowledge base, we draw upon recent data from two national surveys specifically designed for this purpose.

The first data set was collected for the 2007 Rural Teacher Retention Study, conducted under the auspices of the National Research Center on Rural Education Support. One component of this study was a national survey of rural school district administrators. The school administrator sample consisted of 320 districts distributed across 44 states. The second data set was collected in 2009 as part of the Rural Special Education Study, also conducted by the National Research Center on Rural Education Support. The Rural Special Education Study surveyed 373 special education administrators in 43 states.

Rural Teacher Retention Study

Results from the Rural Teacher Retention Study revealed that, overall, 84.1% of responding districts reported at least some difficulty filling teacher vacancies (50.3% reported moderate or extreme difficulty filling teacher vacancies). Small Rural School Achievement program (SRSA) and Rural Low-Income Schools (RLIS) districts tended to report moderate to extreme difficulty filling teacher vacancies.

The areas of certification that districts reported as being the most difficult to fill were Math, Science, and Special Education.

- Over 50% of responding districts reported math as being particularly difficult to fill
- Over 50 % reported science as being difficult to fill
- Approximately 43% reported special education as being particularly difficult to fill

When asked about strategies used to recruit teachers to their districts, 42.5% of districts reported using alternate teacher training programs, with about half reporting that they found it to be a very useful strategy.

When asked about the viability of alternative teacher certification programs in rural districts as a means of recruiting and retaining teachers, 45.8% of districts reported that alternative certification would be “very viable” as a *short-term solution*, while 32.2% of respondents reported that it would be “very viable” as a *long-term solution*.

Rural Special Education Study

When asked about their districts’ ability to meet the needs of its special education students, 46.1% of district administrators responded that their districts were only able to meet the needs of their students “moderately well” or “not well.” Districts with higher proportions of minority students were more likely to report being only “moderately” able to meet the needs of their special education students, or to not be able to meet the needs of their special education students. RLIS districts were more likely to report being able to “moderately” meet the needs of special education students.

The specific disabilities most commonly cited by administrators as being particularly difficult to provide for were:

- Autism
- Emotional disturbances
- Behavioral disorder / behavioral supports.

Almost half the districts surveyed reported that it was somewhat difficult to fill special education teacher vacancies (49.3%). Roughly 47% of districts in the sample had at least one special education vacancy in the year prior to the administration of the survey. Overall, about 6% of all districts reported having one or more vacant positions for more than a year.

In districts where traditional hiring strategies weren’t working, and in an attempt to meet the No Child Left Behind Highly Qualified teacher requirements, administrators reported using alternative means for staffing such as:

- Using a “grow your own” strategy (approximately 12%),
- Paying for paraprofessionals to become certified teachers (17%),
- Providing opportunities for special education staff to become highly qualified (82.9%),
- Using emergency or provisional certification (66.7%), and
- Hiring staff or professionals from local service providers (60.0%).

These studies illustrate how individual rural school districts are attempting to overcome challenges related to recruiting and retaining teachers.

What are the State-level responses to the issue of recruitment and retention of teachers in hard to staff districts?

In the face of state budget cuts, teacher lay-offs and school closures, there are still schools and districts with dramatic teacher shortages. States are creating a variety of programs in response to the growing issue of hard to staff schools. These programs take three general forms, although there is much overlap across the three:

- Grow Your Own
- Alternative Certification
- High School Focused

In general, Grow Your Own (GYO) programs identify residents in rural districts who wish to become teachers, or certified teachers in rural districts who are willing to become certified in an area of need, and provide access to teacher preparation programs. These programs sometimes include tuition assistance.

Alternative Certification programs are similar to GYO programs, but may not always seek individuals living in rural or local communities. In many cases, Alternative Certification programs provide candidates access to teacher preparation programs in varied locations and with varied expectations for the amount of time it might take to complete the program. It is important to note that both GYO and Alternative Certification programs provide supports for non-traditional students, allowing students to proceed through programs at self-determined rates, as well as providing remedial and other academic supports to help students meet the program's academic challenges.

Programs focusing on high school students attempt to attract current high school students to the field of teaching. These programs may target students in particular communities and may partner with one or more community colleges or four-year institutions. Programs often include course work offered at the high school as well as special summer programs, opportunities for high school students to take courses on the college campus, and job shadowing or other "real world" experiences.

A National Review of Rural Grow Your Own Programs

In an effort to see how states are responding to the issue, the National Research Center on Rural Education Support investigated current Grow Your Own, Alternative Certification and High School Focused programs targeting rural districts in the US.

Researchers scanned publicly available Internet materials from each of the 50 states on Grow Your Own teacher education programs, alternative licensure/certification programs, and programs directed at High School students. The scan started with state departments of education and then expanded to include institutes of higher education, academic articles, and periodicals. We investigated the alternative certification programs in every state and created a grid of all currently operating programs. Many of the states simply had a basic alternative licensure option which involved individuals getting the training themselves or with little help from their state or district. However, some programs demonstrated unique ideas to recruit and support future teachers. We selected a sample of these types of programs for our review.

In order to more fully understand why these programs were developed, what needs they were designed to meet, and how they were achieving their goals, we conducted interviews with program directors or representatives. We conducted in-depth, telephone interviews with 18 programs from 16 states. This does not represent a random sample nor does it represent the full spectrum of programs. See Table 1.

Table 1. Program Type and Key Program Components

State	Program name	Program Type	Key Program Components
AK ^a	Transition to Teaching (AKT ²)	Grow Your Own	Prepare teachers with skills needed for teaching in rural Alaska.
AZ	Alternative Path to Certification	Alternative Certification Grow Your Own	Hire highly qualified teachers to work in rural districts; identify paraprofessionals in district and assist in certification; work with certified elementary teachers to achieve special education certification.
AR	Teach Arkansas	Alternative Certification Grow Your Own	A group of various non-traditional licensure programs aimed at getting teachers into rural schools.
AR ^a	Teachers of Tomorrow	High School	Encouraging high school students to attend college and take more responsibility for their education, and guide them towards the teaching profession.
FL	Educator Preparation Institutes	Alternative Certification	An accelerated teacher training program for adults who already hold a bachelors' degree, to expedite their entry into the classroom.
HI	Kūkuluao and Ka Lama Education Academy	Grow Your Own	Avenues for teacher recruitment, support, and retention; specifically targeting community members and Hawaiian natives.
ID	Grow Your Own Teacher Program	Grow Your Own	Scholarships, specific career ladder for bilingual school district staff to complete requirements to best help ESL and Native American students.
IL	Grow Your Own Teacher Program	Grow Your Own	Recruitment of parents and community members who live in an area lacking a diverse workforce to the teaching profession, and supporting them through a bachelors' degree program and certification. Loan forgiveness if they teach in a qualifying school for 5 years.
LA	Students Teaching And Reaching (STAR) Program	High School	A one-credit course, sometimes eligible for college credit, offered at high schools to give students a glimpse of the teaching profession.
MD	Maryland Approved Alternate Preparation Program	Alternative Certification	District-based programs to help fill teacher shortage areas such as math and science.
MA	Teach South Coast	Alternative Certification	Regional program to fill teacher shortage areas in local school districts (generally math and science).
NC	North Carolina Teaching Fellows	High School	Competitive scholarship program to attract North Carolina high school students to a teacher education program in the state. In exchange, participants must teach at a high-need school in the state for four years.
OH	CAPE (Council Attracting Prospective Educators)	High School	A five-day summer program designed to introduce high school students to the field of education, with a focus on diversity.
SC	Call Me MISTER (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models)	Grow Your Own	College-based program to train African-American and Latino men to become teachers and mentors in low-income elementary schools.
UT	Teachers of Tomorrow	High School	Coursework while in high school, an intensive summer program, additional college coursework, and scholarships, supporting future teachers.
VT	Alternate Licensure Route (Peer Review)	Alternative Certification	Peer review as a more flexible source of alternate licensure evaluation, specifically for career and technical education.
VT	Post-Baccalaureate Licensure Program	Alternative Certification	A simpler way for mid-career professionals to meet licensure requirements, utilizing flexible scheduling and online coursework.
WA	Alternative Routes to Teaching (Interviewed 3 programs)	Alternative Certification Grow Your Own	Paraprofessionals are able to access coursework to become credentialed teachers, and keep their paraprofessional jobs while doing so. They then "pay back" their scholarship by teaching in their school for eight years.

^a Phone interview not completed.

Key Needs Addressed by Programs

The programs we interviewed were developed for a variety of reasons.

- **Placing teachers in hard to staff schools** was cited as one of the most common reasons programs were developed. Even in states with budget crises and teachers lay-offs, programs were focused on training and placing teachers in low income, minority and rural schools.
- **Training special education and English Language teachers** was also identified as a critical need in low income, rural communities. Changing demographics in rural communities have resulted in increases in both ELL and special education students.
- **Math, Science and Foreign Language** teachers, particularly at the secondary level, are in demand in rural and low income districts.
- **Placing minority teachers** in predominantly minority schools was a focus of several programs.

Program Partnerships and Funding

The programs interviewed were housed in a variety of institutions, most commonly state departments of education. These programs tended to partner with local community colleges, local school districts, and state four-year institutions. These partnerships were essential to program implementation and participant recruitment.

State and Federal grants were the primary funding sources for the majority of the GYO and alternative certification programs interviewed. Rarely did programs report a single source of funding. In most cases, the state provided supplemental support to federal funds. Partner organizations such as universities, community colleges and local school districts were also sources of funds, usually providing scholarships for program students. Stand-alone programs, those not subsumed in state departments of education, like the Call Me MISTER (SC) or CAPE (OH) programs, received funding from a variety of outside sources. These included private corporations, community foundations, and professional organizations.

Themes

In addition to examining why programs were developed and what needs they were developed to address, the open-ended questions yielded several common themes. These themes

Key Needs

Many of the programs serve multiple key needs, depending on the pressing issues in their state and local area. Numerous states face the same challenges in recruiting and retaining highly-qualified teachers, and may use similar strategies to increase the availability and retention of highly-qualified teachers. Key needs are listed below, each with a few examples of programs that address each need.

To recruit teachers for hard-to-staff areas such as math, science, special education, and foreign language

Arizona – Alternative Path to Certification
Arkansas – Teachers of Tomorrow
Florida – Educator Preparation Institutes
Maryland - Maryland Approved Alternate Preparation Program
Massachusetts - TEACH South Coast

To support parents, community members, and paraprofessionals in low-income communities to attend college and become highly qualified teachers

Hawaii - Kūkuluao and Ka Lama Education Academy
Illinois – Grow Your Own Teacher Program
Washington - Alternative Routes to Teaching

To increase high school and college students' interest and experience in a teaching career

Arkansas – Teachers of Tomorrow
Louisiana – STAR (Students Teaching and Reaching) Program
North Carolina - North Carolina Teaching Fellows
Ohio - CAPE (Council Attracting Prospective Educators)
Utah - Teachers of Tomorrow

To recruit teachers into the hard-to-staff regions of the state

Alaska – Transition to Teaching
Arizona – Alternative Path to Certification
Arkansas – Teach Arkansas
Vermont - Post-Baccalaureate Licensure Program

To address the issue of diversity in the teaching profession

Arkansas – Teachers of Tomorrow
Idaho – GYO Teacher Program
South Carolina – Call Me MISTER

center on how programs are successfully recruiting and retaining teachers.

The theme **Ties to Community** emerged in the majority of our interviews. The ways in which programs reflected this theme varied. First, for several of the programs, this means recruiting locally, specifically targeting individuals who already have ties to the school and community, such as paraprofessionals and parents. Programs acknowledged that local community members would be more likely to return to or stay in their rural community after completing the program. In other programs, the goal of identifying local recruits stems from an understanding of the difficulty in getting people to move into their communities. Size, isolation and lack of housing all make recruiting from outside the community difficult.

Second, this theme reflected the need to develop the local workforce. Programs recognized that their schools could benefit from local community members. We saw this in efforts to recruit teachers who were culturally similar and who spoke the same language as their students. There were also efforts to attract career changers and members of the community who were retired or had been laid-off. These individuals were targeted to bring their skills to teaching, especially in the fields of math and science.

Third, the theme was not only reflected in recruitment strategies, but also in program expectations. Programs acknowledged that in many cases they were helping non-traditional students get a college degree and teaching certification, and that these students may progress at a different pace than traditional college students and may need a variety of access points to their education. Course work, professional development and other training opportunities were often brought to participants by offering courses at local community colleges, providing training sessions on Saturdays and in short summer courses, and providing online opportunities for learning.

Ties to Community

- **Local Recruitment** is commonplace among “Grow Your Own” programs. By recruiting individuals who already have ties to the community, these future teachers are a great asset to the school district. Many have raised families in the area and have a spouse who is also employed locally. They are also keenly aware of local customs and strengths of the area and may have other strong community ties.
- **Career Changers – Arizona’s Alternative Path to Certification** is an example of a program that recruits local professionals and retirees into the teaching profession. **Washington’s Alternative Routes to Teaching** recruits paraprofessionals already in the district and assists them in becoming fully certified.
- **Workforce Development – Hawaii’s Kūkulua and Ka Lama Education Academy** attracts parents with children in the Hawaii school system to a career in education. They provide strong mentoring as these adults work towards an education degree.
- **Partnership with Local Districts – Florida’s District Alternative Certification** program works with school districts statewide to assist teachers who are already in the classroom, but on a temporary certification, to be able to achieve their full professional licensure and continue to teach.
- **Cultural Compatibility – South Carolina’s Call Me MISTER** program specifically seeks to recruit African-American and Latino men into the field of education. These men serve as role models for the predominantly African-American and Latino populations in many of the state’s rural districts. The program works with universities statewide to train future teachers.

Mentoring was another theme that emerged from our interviews. In addition to providing many access points to training and education, the majority of programs also placed an emphasis on mentorship. Programs worked to provide participants with mentoring in both the education and work environment. Support and mentoring were provided by community college or four-year university faculty for students while they take courses.

Mentors were also provided in the schools where program participants are placed. Several programs provided specific training and compensation for mentors. In addition, programs also viewed their participants as potential mentors and role models for the students they would teach. The goal is to develop role models who will motivate students to stay in school and improve students' academic achievement.

Mentorship

- **District-Based and School-Based Mentors – The North Carolina Teaching Fellows** program allows college education majors to spend time with local school districts, not only working in classrooms but getting experience in the workings of a district central office and becoming familiar with the school district as a whole. This also works as a networking opportunity for job-seeking after graduation. Students also participate in significant amounts of field experience as early as their freshman year.
- **Education-Based and Training-Based Mentors – Weber State University (Utah) Teachers of Tomorrow** program works with high school students interested in attending Weber State's education program. Through a high school course, intensive week-long summer training program, Future Teachers of America program, and several other opportunities, participants get mentoring as they begin to experience a teaching career for themselves.
- **Program Participants Act as Mentors – Idaho's Grow Your Own Teacher** program focuses heavily on bilingual individuals within the community. The goal of this program is for them to receive mentorship while they complete a teacher education program and ideally return to teach in their local area. They return to then be mentors to the high school students they are teaching - acting as examples of "success through education".

Summary

The existing research base on recruitment and retention of rural teachers has primarily focused on illustrating the issue: rural districts are struggling to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. The Key Needs identified in our review mirror comments of school district administrators from around the country. Our review of GYO and alternative certification programs shifts the focus to what districts and states are *doing* to confront the issue and solve staffing problems. The programs we interviewed represent a number of approaches being utilized by states and districts to strengthen education in rural communities.

Previous studies have reported that rural districts have particular difficulty recruiting math, science, English Language Learner and special education content areas. The GYO and alternative certification programs we identified were directly addressing these needs. Many of the programs we interviewed focused on recruiting and training participants for staffing these high need content areas. Programs were intentional in seeking out career changers with math and science experience and also with assisting currently licensed teachers in obtaining their special education certification. Several programs also demonstrated an effort to recruit bilingual paraprofessionals, parents, and community members and assist them as they obtained their English Language Learner (ELL) certification and licensure.

As research has suggested, retaining teachers can also be a struggle for low-income, rural school districts. The programs interviewed address this issue both through recruitment of community residents with roots in the local area, and through various intensive mentoring efforts. Improving school-level support for new teachers had been suggested as a strategy for improving teacher retention (Hammer, et al., 2005), and these GYO programs are achieving that through mentoring. Mentors at the community college or university level help program students successfully achieve their teaching certifications. Mentors in rural schools help new teachers adjust, acclimate and work towards success in their new positions.

Recruiting locally and tailoring teacher preparation programs toward rural education have emerged as potential solutions to rural districts' difficulty in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers (NRCRES, 2007 & 2009; Barley & Brigham, 2008; Monk, 2007). The GYO and alternative certification programs we interviewed were focused on these issues. Many had strong, active partnerships with local school districts. These partnerships helped recruit teachers, supported mentorship of interns and new teachers, and in some cases, helped focus teacher preparation programs

The majority of the programs interviewed received funding through state and federal sources. Most were dependent on state and federal grants, few programs (2) had permanent lines in state budgets. There were also programs that received funds from private organizations, universities, community colleges, corporations, community foundations, and professional organizations. These kinds of funding streams leave the programs vulnerable during economic down turns and many of the programs discussed having to reduce the number of students they could support, reduce services, and even cut entire programs.

Next Steps

The rural school districts that were partners with programs we interviewed, as well as districts surveyed in other research, view GYO programs as potential *long-term solutions* to teacher recruitment and retention difficulties. The programs we identified in this national review reflect some of the ways in which many rural districts currently report meeting their staffing needs: assisting paraprofessionals in obtaining certification, assisting currently certified teachers in obtaining additional licensure and certifications, and providing alternative teacher certification programs. It is therefore important for these programs to be studied and evaluated. Many, but not all, of the programs we interviewed were relatively new and few have undergone formal evaluations. The field needs to conduct well-designed demonstration projects and program evaluations in order to determine the effectiveness of these GYO and alternative certification programs.

Research is needed to foster on-going learning about these types of programs and how they impact education in rural settings. It is critical to begin to identify which components of the program have the strongest positive impacts. States and districts need to understand under what circumstances and for which populations these programs are most effective. Program evaluations should also examine the cost effectiveness of these programs, determine how various funding streams may impact program implementation and fidelity; and also attempt to understand the cost of *not* implementing such programs. Focused research will illuminate the broader social impact of these GYO and alternative certification programs on the communities they serve. These types of studies will build the evidence-base of best practices in the area of Grow Your Own teacher preparation programs that is crucial to inform policy.

A research agenda that links practice and learning in such a way that programs implemented today can become the research base that informs policy and ultimately strengthens education for rural families and communities is warranted.

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For more information, please contact:

Kimberly Dadisman, Ph.D.

Phone: (773) 256-5124

Email: kdadisman@chapinhall.org

**National Research Center
on Rural Education Support**

100 E. Franklin St., Ste. 200

Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8115

Toll-free Phone: (866) 223-8709

Email: info@nrcres.org

Website: www.nrcres.org